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End Times or New Life?
Reflections on the Future of American Religious Archives

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In his introduction to the Society of American Archivists 1980 manual on managing religious archives, then SAA president Maynard Brichford wrote:

> One of the most remarkable developments in the recent history of American and Canadian archival activity has been the rapid growth of religious archives. This heightened interest has been evident not only in the collection and preservation of religious records, but it has also fostered an expansion in the number of religious archival repositories. Never before have denominations, individual churches, and other religious organizations been more aware of the need for archival programs to locate their records and make them available for research use.[1]

Over thirty years later, the outlook for religious archives appears quite different. The burgeoning archival programs of the 1980s now weigh like millstones about the necks of those who manage struggling local, regional, and national religious institutions. While administrators and clergy alike remain aware of the need for and value of religious archives, the decline of organized religion in the United States necessitates difficult deliberations regarding the future of religious archival programs.

[1] August R. Suelflow, *Religious Archives: An Introduction* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980), 5.

Those who work for a religious institution, belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque, or simply read the newspaper know that American religious institutions, particularly Christian institutions, navigate troubled waters today. The American Catholic Church has devoted tremendous resources to managing the clergy sex abuse scandals, with several archdioceses filing for bankruptcy. The Episcopal Church is entering the ninth year of an ugly and divisive battle over the ordination of homosexuals. Christian rhetoric in politics is mean-spirited, if not outright nasty, and deeply divides believers into warring camps. The Evangelical Right is the most vocal of these camps, but the Evangelical Left also takes swings at believers and non-believers alike.

Meanwhile, the number of Americans identifying as Christians has fallen precipitously. According to the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) of 2008, a survey of over 50,000 English- and Spanish-speaking Americans, only 76% of Americans identified as Christians in 2008. Just 18 years earlier, 86% identified as Christians.[2] Dwindling numbers of American Christians translate into dwindling resources for American Christian institutions and their archival programs.

Clearly, archival programs for religious institutions face hard times. But are they end times? Budget and staffing cuts in religious archival programs have become the

[2] Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, *American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS 2008) Summary Report* (Hartford, CT: Trinity College, 2009), 5.

norm rather than the exception.[3] Some religious archival programs have closed, sending their collections to larger institutions with the financial means to care for them.[4] The hard times facing religious archives, however, need not be end times. By familiarizing themselves with contemporary trends in American religious life and employing their collections to address those trends, archivists of religious collections may find new significance and purpose for their repositories and the documents they hold.

Where Have All the American Christians Gone?

Handwringing over the disappearance of American Christians has generated a flurry of books, articles, and Web sites about the retention and recruitment of church members.[5] Membership losses in Catholic parishes and mainline Protestant congregations are often attributed to the lure of evangelical and non-denominational churches offering contemporary worship styles and music. Yet American church membership statistics belie this line of thinking. Americans are leaving religious institutions in droves – not just Christian institutions, but all

[3]See, for example, Margery N. Sly's presentation as part of the panel "Survivor! Archives and Manuscript Repositories: Managing during Economic Crisis," presented at The Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C. on Friday, August 13. Sly was then serving as Deputy Executive Director of the Presbyterian Historical Society.

[4] See, for example, Morgen MacIntosh Hodgetts's "Planning the Future of a Religious Community's Archives: Moving from Vision to Reality," a case study of the move of the DeAndreis-Rosati Archives to DePaul University. Presented at the Midwest Archives Annual Meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan on April 21, 2012.

[5] Perhaps the most well-known book on church growth is Rich Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Crowth without Compromising Your Mission & Message* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). On the web, see, for example, the Center for Church Communications' website "Church Marketing Sucks"(http://www.churchmarketingsucks.com/, accessed 05/21/2012) and the Catholics Come Home campaign (http://www.catholicscomehome.org, accessed 05/21/2012),

religious institutions. According to Linda Mercadante, professor of theology at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio, those who leave may first try another congregation or two, another denomination or two, or even another faith tradition, but many contemporary Americans ultimately choose to disaffiliate with religious organizations altogether.[6]

Returning to the aforementioned ARIS survey of 2008, the number of Americans who identify their religious affiliation as "none" doubled to 15% between 1990 and 2008.[7] Sociologically, the "nones" encompass every ethnic and racial group in the United States, including Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans. They are more likely to be male, under age 50, and never married. While the "nones" include atheists, only 7% of the "nones" surveyed in 2008 identified as such. Other "nones" are characterized as agnostics or deists and theists who do not participate in conventional organized religion.[8] In fact, the fastest growing group among the "nones" comprises those who identify as "spiritual but not religious." Their numbers in the United States are estimated to be 50 million.[9]

The "spiritual but not religious," or SBNRs, are Americans who "self-identify a life of spirituality that rejects traditional organized religion as the sole or most valuable

[6] Linda Mercadante, "Spiritual but Not Religious: Is This the New Christianity?" (Presentation, New Perspectives on Faith Series, Goshen, Indiana, October 1, 2011).
[7] Kosmin, 5.
[8] Barry A. Kosmin, et. al. *American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population: A Report Based on the American Religious Identification Survey* (Hartford: Trinity College, 2009), 1-4, 11.
[9] Mercadante, October 1, 2011.

means of furthering spiritual growth."[10] Americans become SBNRs for a variety of reasons, many of which have to do with the failures of organized religion. Diana Butler Bass, author and fellow at Seabury Western Theological Seminary, notes that many people leaving churches today actually wish to belong to a faith community. But, having tried a number of congregations and denominations, they leave because they cannot find one that does not engage in what they describe as "institutional hypocrisy."[11] Mercadante's findings are similar; she describes the SBNRs as spiritual seekers who read and think a lot about faith, but who distrust institutions and the authority they wield.[12] Today, the institutional trappings of denominations and dioceses, seem to repel rather than attract believers.

Archives and the Institutional Church

There is no question that archivists have benefited from the structure of the institutional church. After all, it's difficult to schedule records for a spiritual movement. It's even more difficult to convince those leading a spiritual movement that they should invest resources in an archives. For better or for worse, American Christian denominations in the 20th century modeled themselves after corporations – after businesses.[13] While there are, of course, important differences in polity, structure, and practice, American Catholic and Protestant traditions alike administer

[10] Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6.
[11] Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012) 25.
[12] Mercadante, October 1, 2011.
[13] Ibid., 71-75.

themselves like large, powerful corporations, rather than cooperatives, loose social movements, or extended families. American religious archivists know that is the case, for our repositories most closely resemble corporate archives, with a touch of historical society tossed in for good measure. But what are the implications for the ways religious archivists have handled religious records?

In his recent book, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice*, Rand Jimmerson writes, "Nowhere are the potential barriers to accepting the societal responsibilities of the call of justice [open access to records, in this context] more difficult for archivists than for those employed in private sector institutional archives."[14] In his analysis, Jimmerson groups corporate and religious archivists together, for he recognizes and, to some extent, condones their common function as gatekeepers to records. The gatekeeper approach may work well for corporate archives, but can work well for religious archives today? Both the loss of trust in and respect for American church institutions and the prevalence of spiritual searching in American culture should compel religious archivists to embrace a more open approach to managing religious records.

Furthermore, corporate archives further corporate interests in maximizing assets by minimizing legal risk and contributing to marketing and public relations work. Do religious archives, in their present form, contribute substantially to ministry and mission? A religious archives can minimize risk and contribute to marketing and

[14] Rand Jimmerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivist, 2009), 285.

public relations for a denomination, and that clearly benefits the denomination as an institution. But the very survival of the institutional Church is in question in the era of post-Christendom. Anabaptist author and missionary Stuart Murray argues that we are seeing and will continue to see tremendous change in American and European churches as they adjust to their loss of power, resources, and influence in Western society. In fact, Murray predicts that all Christian denominations will become less and less institutional in the West. Instead of wielding influence in society, they will function at the margins. Rather than funneling their resources to maintain bureaucracies, they will focus on mission – the witnessing of their faith in both words and deeds. If they weather the transition to post-Christendom, churches will emerge as profoundly changed entities.[15]

The Future of Religious Archives

If institutional churches as we know them begin to change, as Murray has suggested they will, what will become of religious archives? What would a missional religious archival program – one that actively engages in ministry and witness - look like? This author imagines it would resemble the college or university archives that contributes meaningfully to the teaching and learning mission of its parent institution. In other words, engaging in mission and ministry through and with historical records need not damage the integrity of an archival program. Professional archival practices and values do not inherently conflict with witnessing

[15] Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Goshen, Ind.: Paternoster, 2004), 20.

faith. Although James M. O'Toole, one of the few theorizers of religious archives, argues that religious archives are plagued by the "apparent incompatibility of archival work and religious belief," the incompatibility he describes is actually between archival work and religious *polity.*[16] Nothing about religious belief stands in the way of best practices in archives management, for truth and justice are close to the heart of both. Religious polity, however, can obstruct good archival practice. Polity, fortunately, is not immutable.

One of the most important components of a Christian witness through religious archives would be a "ministry of accountability." Archivists must work with Church leaders to help them understand the damage they do to themselves, their congregations, and their mission by closing public access to its records in order to keep secrets, ranging from the inconsequential to the scandalous. The practice of keeping of secrets in Western Christian institutions has broken hearts and trust. The longer our church leaders resist opening records in the interest of reconciliation with those it has harmed, the more American Christians will call into question their commitment to the message of the Gospel. Openness and honesty will at first be difficult, but they are necessary if the American Christian denominations and communities wish to remain authentic.

Second, religious archivists must challenge rather than perpetuate the false dichotomy between the historical record and the work of the Spirit. This dichotomy

[16] James M. O'Toole, "What's so Different about Religious Archives?," *The Midwestern Archivist* IX:2 (1984): 99.

endangers the work of religious archivists by inserting a barrier between historical records and the mysterious entity that propels the Church forward and connects believers to God.[17] Whether or not the Spirit can be documented in the historical record, the fruits of the Spirit – the labors and accomplishments of those engaged with the Spirit – are evident in religious archives. Religious archivists must understand and interpret the historical record as a place to discern evidence of the Spirit at work, not as a place where the Spirit does not reside.

Third, the witness of American religious archivists must include the global church. Outside of Europe and North America, the Christian communities are thriving. In many cases, Western religious repositories hold the earliest historical records of those vibrant faith communities. In collaboration with indigenous church leaders, American religious archivists can and should address how best to reunite people with their history. Religious archivists will, most likely, find this work to be life-giving. Reciprocal relationships among American religious archives and indigenous church organizations or congregations may be one step towards healing a past entangled with economic exploitation and cultural imperialism.

Fourth, religious repositories must welcome 'strangers' into faith traditions by recovering their hidden histories. As American denominations lose their traditional ethnic flavors, they gain diversity. For example, the Mennonite Church USA, which began as a Germanic denomination of Yoders, Hochstetlers, and Thiesens now

[17] It is interesting to note that archivists have contributed significantly to this false dichotomy. See, for example, Robert Schuster, "Documenting the Spirit," *American Archivist* 45 (Spring 1982).

attributes 20% of its membership to racial and ethnic minorities of the Jackson, Lopez, Lee and countless other clans. The Mennonite Church USA Archives strives to provide "historical hospitality" to that 20% by uncovering and celebrating their history within the Mennonite tradition. It is critical that their history not be whitewashed to make a denomination look better than it was or is. Rather, religious archivists must honestly proclaim that non-traditional members of denominations have a rich, but sometimes painful, history in the denomination that extends further back in time than most people realize.

Finally, an archival witness must focus on sharing historical faith stories to inspire believers today. For centuries, Christians collected, preserved, and retold the stories of saints and martyrs to provide examples along the journey toward discipleship. Religious archivists would do well to reclaim the tradition of hagiography. Although many denominations do not canonize saints, believers are nonetheless drawn to the life narratives of exceptional Christians, and religious repositories hold thousands of these life narratives. In the Mennonite Church USA Archives, for example, one can find the story of Tillie Yoder. Tillie was an Amish woman who founded a church camp for impoverished African American children from Chicago on her family's Ohio farm in the late 1940s, long before the Civil Rights Movement was born. Because Tillie's plans initially met resistance from the Mennonite Mission Board, this passionate young woman wrote letters and essays explaining why racial boundaries needed to be broken by Christian love, and how

her work at the camp expressed her faith.[18] Such stories are priceless gifts that must be widely shared.

End Times or New Life?

Returning to the question posed in the title of this paper, this author hopes that religious archivists will understand that the answer should be "Both!" The 20th century model of quasi-corporate religious archival programs cannot and, in this author's estimation, should not continue, but a new life is possible. This new life for religious archives will be challenging. It will require closer cooperation between religious leaders and archivists. It must entail a willingness to liberate the truth held within religious archives, even when the truth is painful. It will demand that religious archivists think creatively and grapple with the emotional and spiritual complexity contained in the records we care for. It will challenge religious archivists to facilitate community formation across the barriers of geographical distance and time. And it will reinvigorate religious archival programs.

[18] Tillie Yoder Nauraine Papers, 1947-2008. HM1-318. Mennonite Church USA Archives – Goshen. Goshen, Indiana.